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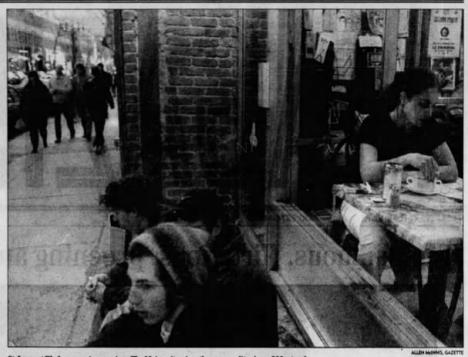
COVER STORY

'Do you want some spice in your life? It's a genetic strain here.'



ALLEN MCINNIS, GAZETTE

St. Laurent Blvd. on a spring evening. The Main epitomizes the cosmopolitanism of Montreal.

Turmoil yes, boring no

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Political discourse, like anything else Montrealers engage in, is brazenly passionate, hardly polite or genteel or correct. Montrealers have style, and life is messy. I realized how much I have, perversely, missed that.

And maybe winter was worth the wait. Although spring is brief, I can bask in the mother of all stripteases.

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I returned because I was curious about Montreal's ballyhooed post-referendum mood. Quebec news being so rare in Bay Area newspapers, I only became aware of the precise date of the vote four days before it was held. (Yet, I knew this must be big stuff because there was a grim Peter Jennings reporting from Montreal, wearing his "crisis cone" trenchcoat.) An news of my home town quickly subsided in the U.S., friends phoned with dark updates, sent cautionary clippings.

When would it all end – this long national nightmare that made, say, Watergate seem like a tea party – and how? Was Montreal still home? I had to find out for myself.

Growing up in the Snowdon district in the 1950s, I had little idea that most people on this island spoke French. I'd never met anyone who actually parlez-vous'd. French-Canadians were derisively dubbed "Pepsis" for favouring Pepsi over Coke, the cheapies getting 13 ounces for the same price as six of the latter. My French teacher was from England. I escaped high school with the bare minimum passing grade in French, which I forgot the next day (there was no pressing need to speak la langue). The only Frenchies I knew anything about were Maurice "Rocket" Richard, Jean Beliveau and Jacques Plante (during my first five years following hockey, "les Habitants" won five Stanley Cups). For this boy, the 1960s were a voyeuristic trade-awakening. Jean Lesage's "quiet revolution," the FLQ and mailbox bombs, protesters booing the queen in '64, glorious Expo 67, de Gaulle's "Vive le Québec libre!" and Trudeaumania – wow, Quebec was on the map! Though these events are etched in my mind, I didn't mingle with French-Canadians and rarely strayed east of the Main.

> **"I don't want to live in a place where there are no anglos. They're a big part of this city."**

When I became the Montreal Star's pop-music critic in 1969, at the tender age of 23, I was forced to cover the likes of Robert Charlebois and the exploding joual scene. I relished its colour and vitality – for music crosses all boundaries, n'est-ce pas? – yet it would be years before I understood the lyrics. But the events of October 1970 were more tangible: I was afraid to leave my Crescent St. office at night for fear of being arrested by police rounding up anyone who looked vaguely suspicious: I wore leather pants at the time.

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Last October a taxi took me through downtown avenues of gleaming post-modern office buildings, streets of old triplexes festooned with those distinctive outdoor staircases, the cross atop Mount Royal illuminating the night sky like a beacon of soul. I spoke French to the cabbie, and he spoke English to me. Mais oui, it felt good to be back.

But in the cold light of day, I was shocked by the number of A Vendre and A Louer signs, the empty or boarded-up storefronts. This was worse than I imagined. I searched out friends to give me the lowdown on the situation. Everyone had something different to say.

I hooked up Hubert Bauch, the political writer at *The Gazette* I ran with in the late '70s. He speaks in the calm, collected tones I've always admired in his writing. A few months before the referendum, Hubie phoned me, saying he could hardly wait for the vote, as the Yes side – trailing badly in the polls – would surely lose big-time and he could finally, after nearly 20 years, get on to writing about something else. Alas, it was not to be.

"Ah, the best-laid plans!" he cracked ruefully. "I'm tired of this endless and degrading quarrel. I foolishly thought things were going to come to a head, settle down, and we could all chill out and turn to other things, particularly the tremendous possibilities of what can be done with Montreal. I guess it was wishful thinking on my part.

"We're involved in a long-term transition. Back when I started my career, I wanted the world to change from one day to the next. I've come to grips with the fact that it doesn't. It's interesting, the way things turn over slowly, and how attitudes filter through. But it's getting pieced to the point of absurdity. People are becoming caricatures of themselves, the arguments are so entrenched and patently transparent, yet people pay lip service to them. It's discouraging. I'm thinking, there has to be more to it than this."

I had lunch with Nathalie Petrowski, the feisty La Presse columnist whom I still occasionally light a candle for. She's as engaging and vivacious as ever. I asked her if the anglos complain too much.

"If I was in their position, I think I'd complain too. They feel very threatened. However, I do feel that they are overly paranoid ... Yes, there are extremists, but I'm of the new post-modern independantiste generation. We want to be multicultural and cosmopolitan. I don't want to live in a place where there are no anglos. They're a big part of the spirit of this city. We do want them to get a little bit interested in the culture that's around them, though.

"After the referendum, for the first time, the English have been expressing their anger. Even if it's screaming, at least there's some form of communication. Before, it was totally isolated, the two solitudes, indifference. Now, we at least know they exist. I guess they know we exist, too.

"I went to meet a group of about 45 anglos on the West Island. Things were tense and they jumped on me, but I did my bit. After an hour and a half, we broke for coffee – because of course that's all there was, and no smoking, hey, we were with anglos here! – and then we relaxed and just had fun. The problem is rhetoric and ideology. It's all in the head.

"I'm not really fed up with the situation. The tension between the groups is what makes for the originality of Montreal. It's not violent like Bosnia or Algeria. This tension is creative."

Byron Ayanoglu, food writer, chef-to-the-stars and playwright, has moved back after 10 years in Toronto, sick of its backstabbing political correctness. He's large, gregarious, with twinkling eyes to match his laugh.

"The mere idea that someone can make you think in French just because you might have to speak it when you enter a shop is ludicrous. My family was Greek and we were perfectly willing to live in Turkey, naturally speaking the language of our conquerors and Greek in our own home. Go through Europe and you'll find many pockets of ethnics who function fine in the way of the majority. The historical aspects of what's going on here are so transparent. So what if we have an uncomfortable exchange of ideas? The French and English have been bickering for a thousand years. You take it for granted that somehow the evolution will happen.

"Some anglos are being unbelievably short-sighted and self-absorbed; they don't understand history or social change. The solution is for the English to calm down and enjoy what they have. By learning they're giving up a great prize that they have a large stake in. Their grandparents and great-grandparents built it. They're cutting off their nose to spite their face. To live with your neighbours, making compromises, is not the end of the world."

Then there was Nick Auf der Maur, now no longer a city councillor (which came as another shock), but still Mr. Montreal. "This is a great place, always has been. I can't think of any other city I'd want to live in. But it's all so crazy."

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A funny thing happened on my way to the Forum – it was boarded up, abandoned like a ghost town. (When I lived on Atwater Ave. in the 1970s, I passed it every morning on my way to buy the paper, sometimes catching glimpses through the windows of *nos glorieux* whirling like dervishes through practice.) The Forum was to hockey like La Scala is to opera. Indeed, hockey in Montreal is opera, high and low, a microcosm of our fates. Now, the Canadiens play in a "state-of-the-art" facility dubbed "The Keg" as if they each had tinbelled one.

Inside the Molson Centre, the Canadiens boutique resembles a small department store in places and reminds: "Le bleu, blanc, rouge est toujours lit"). The arena is as incandescent as industrial lighting. The sound system is deafening ("Why Can't We Be Friends" when there's a fight, the now-ironic "I Feel Good"). The Sony Jumbotron replay screen spews non-stop images, mainly ads. Faces in the crowd beak in recognition when they are flashed on the screen. I first saw this Hollywood "innovation" at the Sharks' Tank and the Mighty Ducks' Pond and told myself this stunt could never ever occur in Montreal, where hockey is front and centre. The multimedia con is relentless – once in a while a hockey game breaks out.

A French Canadian seated next to me marvels: "C'est Saku Koivu, il est tough, huh?" This innocuous comment is telling: a flashy Finn is the francophone fan favorite, and it's entirely natural to use an English word that fits – so common in Montreal patois, reflecting the citizenry's curious relationship with anglo-America, something language laws cannot regulate.

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My new digs are near Park Ave. and Bernard St., the confluence of Outremont's bourgeoisie (Quebec's influence class), immigrants old and new, steadfast Hasidic Jews, and the 20-something people-in-black beer and coffee crowd. The sign in the window of Pharmacie Jean Coutu says it all: On Parle Français, We Speak English – and repeated in Greek, Chinese, Portuguese, Spanish, and Vietnamese. At the St. Viateur Bagel Shop, it seems the entire city is in line for a fix of the world's best (instead of the doughy "New York style" imposters I was force-fed in Berkeley). And the large hill we call the mountain looms large.

I'm sipping a noon-time café au lait at Exotica, a trendy triple-storey grocery, newsstand, CD shop, restaurant and bar complex on Laurier Ave. "Feels like the same Montreal I always knew," I mention in French to Eric, the young barman. He eagerly replies: "It's the politicians and the media who create the problems. On the street, most everyone gets along. We all come from someplace. I've got Irish in my blood. Sure, there are extremists on both sides. But we're not even capable of throwing a tomato at each other."

"You come to Montreal for its free-spirit ambience," Helen Fotopulos, my city councillor for Mile End, told me. Part of the first generation of immigrant women in municipal politics, she's smart, attractive and motor-mouthed when boasting about Montreal. "Despite the political turmoil, one thing you have to admit, it's not boring. It all comes down to a choice of what kind of life you want to lead. Do you want some spice in your life? It's a genetic strain here." She rattles off the festivals, the bars and cafés, the "naturally poetic" mountain. "Our style of living is a lot more non-American, buying for the day versus buying for the week.

> **"When I come back to bilingual Montreal, I kind of feel I'm back in Canada."**

"Montreal has qualities and charms that you internalize to the point of becoming very sensitive about anybody criticizing it. We feel we can knock it, but nobody else can. When it comes to being hosts and showing it off, the pride is returned tenfold because we actually feel it."

I quickly tired of folks lamenting the disappearance of our town's so-called "glory days" when, as William Weintraub puts it in his book City Unique, Montreal in the '40s and '50s thought of itself as "bilingual, cosmopolitan." Well, it wasn't bilingual – Hugh MacLennan didn't coin "the two solitudes" for nothing – and it was as cosmopolitan as a boomtown bordello. Today, most Montrealers are fluent in two or more languages and the city is – because of its geographic and cyberspace position between Europe and America, because of its new wave of immigrants and polyglot culture and, yes, its political debate – arguably one of a handful of truly cosmopolitan cities in the hemisphere.

Compared with, say, when the PQ was first elected to power, or even when I left eight years ago, there are countless more things to do and enjoy in Montreal's remarkably diverse, unselfconscious culture. One small example: I was amazed by the proliferation every three or four blocks downtown of shops selling all manner of magazines and newspapers in many languages, the sign of an educated, curious populace, despite the dictates of small-minded PQ language policies.

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We're hunkered down in the clubby little Crescent St. bar owned by Ziggy Eichenbaum, a diminutive, Runyonesque character from Poland via Israel. The hockey game flickers silently, but cheers erupt when the "good guys" – the opposing team – score. I am astonished to find myself rooting against my beloved Habitants. "So much the better to force wholesale house-cleaning," Ziggy mutters.

Montreal, I've rediscovered, has a furtive interior social life, at the bar or around the dinner table, whereby opinions pop up as quickly as the wine goes down. Nobody's cool. Winter's permanent case of cabin fever infects the psyche year-round. Talking politics began to get on my nerves, but that didn't stop me.

Talk by PQ blowhards of "creeping bilingualism" seems merely moot, because it's a fact of Montreal life and will never go away. Talk by anglo commentators of "obliterating, one by one, every sign of (anglophone) presence" is simply a lie. And talk radio, which fuels stereotypical thinking on both sides, is a North American media phenomenon. What we hear is not the voice of the people, but the wails of self-proclaimed know-it-alls whose sole purpose in life is to be able to say, "I was on radio." Sadly, too many of our political pundits share this trait.

Xenophobia and racism? Yes, some politicians pop off with incendiary shots that are tied to the uglier aspects of nationalism. Again, it's not an isolated phenomenon. Check the rise of the "angry white male" in the U.S. What was California Proposition 187 – withholding social services to illegal aliens (i.e. brown-skinned people), at the risk of health hazards and increased crime – but thinly disguised white man's revenge?

The infamous sign laws seem a small price to pay to recognize the francophone character of Montreal. Big deal if English lettering is half the size of the French. Yes, the sign cops are petty, but obsessing over them gives them more importance than they deserve, while anglos come across as hopeless whiners.

"You have to be able to turn it off," Fotopulos had advised me of talking politics. "Somewhere you have to have some sobriety. While we waste time haggling over separation, we neglect our economic and infrastructure problems. The challenge is to keep the debate sane and health: Parizeau's referendum-night remarks (blaming "money and the ethnic vote" for the narrow Yes loss) opened up a can of worms, people went berserk. Now we've got a bunch of new disciples on both sides. It's become a travelling dog-and-pony show."

"Our biggest problem," Ayanoglu announces, "is dealing with the winter. Everybody lives as if it's the solstice. When the sun stops they go drink and screw."

George Mihalka, a Hungarian-born director (his L'Homme idéal was last-year's top-grossing Québec movie), dressed from beret to boots in black to match his beard, walks into Ziggy's from out of town, brandishing a pair of Bruins tickets no one wants. He's as passionate about politics and Montreal as he is about hockey.

"It's almost an unspoken convention that we don't talk about politics on the set. We shot L'Homme idéal just before the referendum. Half the crew was French, the other half English. Half were independantiste, and half weren't, and not necessarily divided on language lines. I've seen people argue, and I've stepped in, but it was just a pure political argument, never personal hate.

"Whenever I travel to the rest of Canada, I come back more of a separatist, until I hang out a while and change my mind. Every time I go west, the attitudes are paternalistic and condescending, or they don't have any conception of what's going on. There's this constant looking up to the American ideal. When I come back to bilingual Montreal, I kind of feel I'm back in Canada, strangely enough."

Of course it's a mess. Quoi de neuf? (What else is new?) Montreal is a helluva great city. Don't let anyone tell you otherwise.

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